

# The tears remain

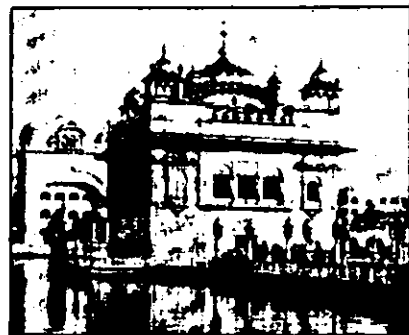
*Our correspondent revisits Punjab after two years*



*Nirmal Mitra has been a special correspondent with SUNDAY since 1985. During this period, Punjab has been part of his regular beat. Though he is based in New Delhi, he*

*has toured extensively through the Punjab countryside, making friends and enemies alike, as he covered the spread of terrorism and militancy in that troubled state.*

*Mitra often visited the Golden Temple and his account of Operation Black Thunder—the successful second attempt to flush out the terrorists within the complex—made SUNDAY'S cover.*



**The Golden Temple: the wounds of Black Thunder haven't healed**

*Two years ago, Mitra was awarded the prestigious Reuters fellowship and took a sabbatical from SUNDAY to go to the United States. He returned a few weeks ago and revisited the state that had occupied so much of his time while at SUNDAY.*

*He found that while things had changed, the human dimensions of the tragedy of Punjab remained. Last week, Mitra reported on the apparent paradox that the economy was soaring while militancy continued and interviewed chief minister Beant Singh.*

*This week he writes about two encounters with the human facet of militancy. Next week, SUNDAY will carry his third report assessing the differences between the Punjab he saw two years ago and the state today.*

## Requiem for a militant

**F**or the family of a slain extremist, the war began when their only breadwinner abandoned them to fight for "the cause". It has been nine months since Satnam Singh, the self-styled Lt Gen. of the Bhindranwale Tiger Force of Khalistan (BTFK-Sanga group), died in an encounter with the police. But, for his struggling dependents, what he has meant for years is a faded colour photograph disintegrating at the edges.

"He was a good student," remembered his mother, Sawinder Kaur, as she shuffled about in the periphery of the high-ceilinged room in their spacious house in Patti village, trying to fix a meal for her sick grandson and daughter-in-law. "He went to college, became an apprentice with a doctor, took training in medicine and opened a clinic in Baha-

miniwala village."

Pained by the army assault on the Golden Temple in 1984, Satnam Singh left his modest practice to take up arms. "Initially, he was not so active, but when the police raids grew persistent, and they began harassing people, he stepped up his activities," his mother recalled. And in 1988, Satnam fled his village to escape from the police.

"When we asked him to give up being an outlaw, he used to say he had to save the honour of his country and people, that he needed his community more than me," sobbed Manjit, his distraught widow, nursing her moaning son, Gurprit (3), who was running a temperature. Satnam Singh was the only child of his parents. "But when his mother begged and pleaded with him not to leave his family, he replied that he had two sons, she could make one of them her son, and

**Satnam Singh's mother, wife and child: only memories remain**



the other her grandson," Manjit said, stroking her child's forehead.

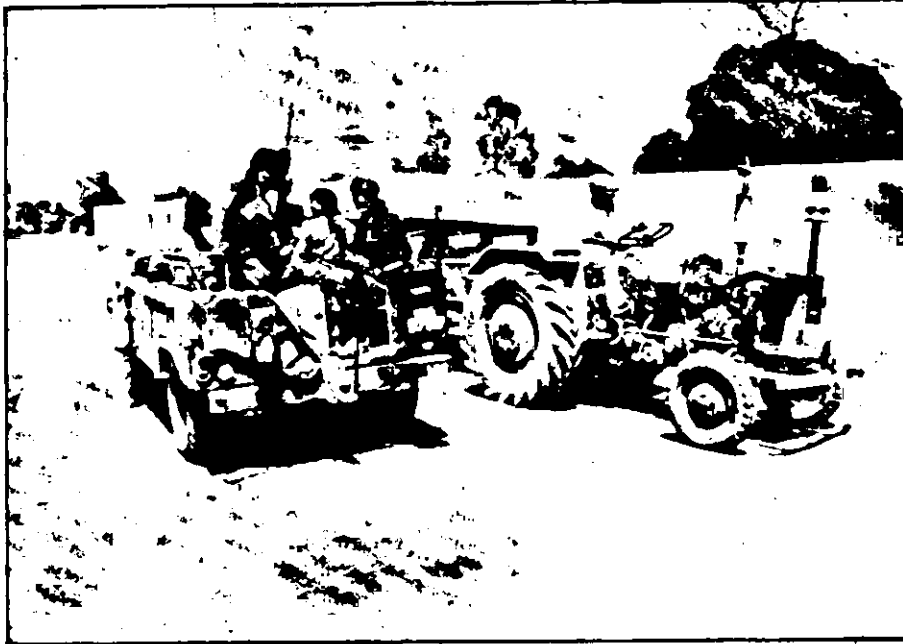
Satnam Singh's gang had fought the police and CRPF in Boorchand, Tatle, Padri and Bakipur. "He could have escaped the one at Dyal last year," said his mother solemnly. "The police had been following them but his associates told him to run because the police were far behind. He chose to stay and fight to the end."

Memories of a brave and stubborn man are all that the members of the family have to live with in their rectangular home and walled courtyard, besides the three acres that they sow and harvest for survival. The older child, now five, who goes to school in Amritsar is not troubled by the thoughts of his father. But the younger, Gurprit, still recalls him: "Papa, please come back, where are you?" he wails from his sick bed.

"The police used to interrogate and harass us as long as he (Satnam) was alive, even though we never got a paise out of him after he left us," Manjit complained. "The police visits stopped after he became a *shaheed* (martyr)," she sighed.

Satnam Singh's body lay along with seven others in a police station near the border. "The police refused to hand over the body to us," Manjit sobbed, as her mother-in-law looked away.

## In a police state



As we drove to the entrance of a village, two jeeps full of commandos who had followed us took up position, ready to fire, if provoked. Realising that bold "press" stickers were not enough, I went ahead and spoke to the officer, while the commandos watched my every move



In the "hottest" pockets of rural Punjab an attempt to interview the family of a militant, dead or alive, is considered an act of sedition that can invite trouble from the army or the police.

As we drove to the entrance of the village home of self-styled Lt Gen-Satnam Singh of the Bhindranwale Tiger Force of Khalistan (BTFK - Sanga group) in Bahaminiwala, Patti, an image appeared in our rear view mirror. Two jeeps full of commandos, who had emerged from hiding, had followed us and had taken up position, ready to fire if provoked.

Realising that bold "press" stickers were not enough to allay military suspicions, I got out to meet the officer, while the commandos, ten of them in all, watched my every move. The Lieutenant Colonel walked up to me. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "We're journalists from Delhi and we've come to do a story on life in rural Punjab," I replied. He asked for my identification, and I showed him my card. He looked at it and nodded.

"Who is this man?" he asked, pointing at my elderly Sikh companion, the principal of a local school. "First of all, I am an ex-serviceman," said Swaran Singh, who had retired as a major from the Army Service Corps. "Secondly, I am a principal of a school."

That brought a smirk. The officer seemed to respond more positively to the mention of an ex-armyman than a journalist. "Just don't take pictures of the jeep with that number 120," he said, watching our photographer, Jitender Gupta, clicking away furiously. "As an ex-serviceman, you know what I mean," he said. The commandos were still in ready-to-fire position.

"Do you find the local people cooperative?" I asked, as the officer began to slowly make his way toward his jeep. "We have a good image, but it's tough to get people to cooperate in a situation of this kind," he answered. "You can't help being suspicious. As a matter of fact, we had been informed about a white Ambassador headed this way," he said, as his lips creased into a smile. •